

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
11th December 2022 - 3rd Sunday of Advent – Gaudete Sunday

Readings (Year A): 1st: Isaiah 35:1-6,10. Psalm: 145:6-10. 2nd: James 5:7-10. **Gospel:** Matthew 11:2-11.

I always feel that the first readings in Advent, which, for most of the three year cycle are all from Isaiah, are very up-beat. On Gaudete, Rejoice Sunday, the mood of this passage is one of the joy of restoration, and exultation, everything blooming and splendid.

Everything is coming together, somewhat like another Exodus, this time after the exile in Babylon. And the prediction of the messianic age when the most unfortunate will share in the blessings of restoration. Five times we get the word joy from Isaiah today.

However from his dark prison cell, John the Baptist is not seeing things quite so surely. He is not rejoicing. He asks a question, which is rather more of a complaint or an objection. While John was being kept in the darkness of the prison and threatened by a frivolous king, Jesus was walking free as a bird outside in the sun with his “Good News.” John found the situation difficult to cope with – after all how would you feel if you were unjustly in prison, and a member of your family was walking around performing miracles but doing absolutely nothing to help you. John’s life had been one of preparing the way for Jesus: have I wasted my time, John wondered.

What we do know is that the Synoptic gospel writers, Matthew, Mark & Luke all say that as soon as Jesus heard of John’s beheading Jesus took his disciples and they all withdrew to a lonely place, as it were to mourn.

Many people all over the world are unjustly imprisoned and even face being put to death for crimes they did not commit. From the Americas to Africa, from the Near, the Middle and the Far East, China and Russia and even some European countries people have their human rights abused, and as with the war in Ukraine we can see how easily injustice and violence can take over and innocent people suffer as a result.

John was in prison for criticising Herod. For fearless speaking the truth, John was imprisoned and finally executed. We see how protesters in many countries face a similar situation, even death for some of them. We know too of savage persecution of Christians across the world. This year here there is severe unrest in our nation with so many strikes and withdrawal of labour and unrest; rejoice can sound hollow in our ears.

It is interesting what Jesus does *not* do in reply to John’s disciples. He does not say yes or no, but points out what has been happening. The blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised. These were the signs prophesied by Isaiah and they were being fulfilled by Jesus, the one whom John had been preparing for, as the forerunner.

Jesus lets his actions, in the context of Israel’s sacred scriptures speak for themselves. He knows John will understand this, and says of him “happy is the man who does not lose faith in me.” This story of John in prison can encourage us all.

Jesus tells the crowds that ‘no one born of woman is greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.’ John is one of the first to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. But even he, in the darkness of his prison, has doubts and needs reassurance.

There are times in our lives when our faith is weakening, our hope is dying, and our charity, our love is running low. We know this happening to many people during and following Covid. This does not mean we should despair. Even a great saint like John had his troubled times.

John gives us an example of what we should do: turn again to Christ. Not because we expect him to ‘magic’ everything better. What he will do is give us renewed faith and courage to go on believing and witnessing to him, as John did by shedding his blood.

‘Strengthen weary hands, steady all trembling knees say to all faints hearts: Courage! Do not be afraid. Look your God is coming. Patience, says St James four times in our 2nd reading: BUT Gaudete: Rejoice Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus.